

## 10. A Wind, a Worm, and a Plant

**Texts:** Jonah 4:5-10; Psalm 25:8, 9; Philippians 2:1-7.

### Quotes:

- In its purest form, truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder. It is a howling reproach. Ted Koppel.
- When you have nothing left but God you will become aware for the first time that God is enough. Dag Hammarskjöld.
- There is but one thing of real value—to cultivate truth and justice, and to live without anger in the midst of lying and unjust men. Marcus Aurelius.

### Introductory questions

What does Jonah's attitude reveal about himself, and about his relationship to God? Why did he go out of the city and make himself a booth? What was Jonah expecting? Did he think he had persuaded God? What does this say to us about our desires, ambitions and God's will? What about Jonah's vacillating emotional state? And what of the parable? Was the plant Jonah's?

### Discussion ideas

Once again Jonah's declares his death wish. In his flight aboard ship, he was indicating that he would rather take a boat trip from which he was not likely to return than to follow God. He asks to be thrown overboard. He tells God he'd rather die than face being seen as a false prophet. Now he wants to die because the plant he had nothing to do with dies. The petulant prophet seems to want to blackmail God into doing what he, Jonah, wants. He is the one who should decide what's right, it seems. It reflects an independent and individualistic attitude that is very common today: "It's my life and I'll do what I want." Jonah is even telling God what to do.

The lesson (Sunday, p.114 Teachers) suggests that Jonah's building of a booth at least unconsciously parallels the Israelite's building of booths during the Feast of Tabernacles, a celebration of deliverance from Egypt. Jonah would have surely participated in such a memorial of salvation, but does not see the connection with the salvation of Nineveh!

In his "mis-relating" to God Jonah reveals he all too much like us. Again Jonah is the anti-hero, and the ironic comes through all too clearly. The Ninevites repented. Another opposite. Usually the Israelites ignored the word of God. But these heathen people accept the message of God's judgment, and respond! No wonder Jonah was surprised.

More than surprised. *Angry!* He hadn't wanted them to repent. Now that he was God's man again, restored to prophet status, Jonah wanted to be seen as the great hero. Now he's angry with God because it makes him look like a false prophet. He says he'd rather die! God's man is really still on the run, because he doesn't understand the true character of God.

So God sends him the acted parable of the vine that withers—to show that ultimately God is in control, and that he is to be the one who chooses. And shouldn't God choose to do good? God asks. The answer from God's representative is no! Jonah reveals he is more concerned with being right himself, with his own reputation, and claiming God's message for himself. Despite God's initiation of the message and mission, Jonah has made it his own personal property, and consequently is mad when God does not fulfill what Jonah's expectations.

How deep a lesson Jonah needed to learn about the implications of a God of grace!

## **Ellen White Comments**

Then the Lord gave Jonah an object lesson. He “prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered. And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live.”...

Confused, humiliated, and unable to understand God’s purpose in sparing Nineveh, Jonah nevertheless had fulfilled the commission given him to warn that great city; and though the event predicted did not come to pass, yet the message of warning was nonetheless from God. And it accomplished the purpose God designed it should. The glory of His grace was revealed among the heathen. Those who had long been sitting “in darkness and in the shadow of death, being bound in affliction and iron,” “cried unto the Lord in their trouble,” and “He saved them out of their distresses. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and brake their bands in sunder.” “He sent His word, and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions.” Psalm 107:10, 13, 14, 20. {PK 272-3}

## **Extra material** on mis-relating to God

All too often we also act like Jonah when God doesn’t act as we think he should. We talk as Jonah did, believing that we know best and that God should follow our thinking. Jonah mis-related to God in having conveyed God’s message and then thinking he knew what God should do. In setting himself up as the arbiter of Nineveh’s fate he placed himself above God. He did not argue with God as Abraham did for good, but wanted Nineveh destroyed to satisfy himself. In this Jonah paralleled the human misconceptions of God as a Being of anger and violence, one who sent destruction and was the cause of the unpleasant human condition.

“Take the gain to humanity in the unbelief not yet complete, but now largely preponderant, in the dogma that sickness, pestilence, and famine were manifestations of divine anger, the results of which could neither be avoided nor prevented. The Christian Churches have done little or nothing to dispel this superstition. The official and authorized prayers of the principal denominations, even to-day, reaffirm it.” Charles Bradlaugh.

Similarly, religious doctrine is used to justify anger and hostility to others—somewhat like Jonah did in his response to God, for he wanted God to destroy the heathen enemy.

“A major function of fundamentalist religion is to bolster deeply insecure and fearful people. This is done by justifying a way of life with all of its defining prejudices. It thereby provides an appropriate and legitimate outlet for one’s anger. The authority of an inerrant Bible that can be readily quoted to buttress this point of view becomes an essential ingredient to such a life.” John Shelby Spong

As a result, it’s not surprising that observers of religion conclude that representations of god are unacceptable. If God is viewed as demanding unthinking obedience, meaningless sacrifice, and pointless rituals, then why should thoughtful and caring human beings want to identify with such a Being.

“The Jehovah of the Jews is a suspicious tyrant, who breathes nothing but blood, murder, and carnage, and who demands that they should nourish him with the vapours of animals. The Jupiter of the Pagans is a lascivious monster. The Moloch of the Phoenicians is a cannibal. The pure mind of the Christians resolved, in order to appease his fury, to crucify his own son. The savage god of the Mexicans cannot be satisfied without thousands of mortals which are immolated to his sanguinary appetite.” Baron d’Holbach.

Our role is to reveal God as the one who continually works to save.

## 11. The Last Word

**Texts:** Jonah 4:11.

### Quotes

- If God is love rather than power, it follows that God gains victories by pain rather than force. Reinhold Niebuhr
- God alone can make even religion a virtue, and to him I look for aid that mine may degenerate into no vicious excess. John Quincy Adams
- God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Augustine.

### Introductory questions

Is God's question to Jonah an enforcement of authority or a desire for Jonah to understand God's perspective? How is Jonah relating to God—as servant or friend? Is it OK to raise questions—even angry questions—with God? How are we to respond when God asks us questions? What is God's primary intention? Why does the book end, “and also much cattle”?

### Discussion ideas

It is clearly God's right to act as he chooses. So why does God even ask Jonah the question? And why does Jonah feel able to contradict God? In this lesson we see God continuing to work out his purposes, and wanting Jonah to understand what is really happening. The message of judgment is very real, but not because it brings any pleasure to God to act in this way. His desire is to win back all he can, not willing that any should perish but that all come to repentance. He is even to work on rebellious prophets to help them see that destruction is not the desired outcome, but salvation.

In his dialogue with Jonah, God shows that his concern is not about himself, but with wanting the best for all his created beings. In contrast, Jonah is only concerned about himself. Here we see sin revealed in all its self-centered malevolence—totally preoccupied about me and my own concerns. God's character is revealed as that of one who looks to do good, unconcerned about his own reputation.

One of the misunderstandings about the Great Controversy is that God is trying to prove himself, as if he were primarily concerned about his own position and how he looks before his universe. This is not the case. God is not some insecure person worrying about what others think about him, and trying to make sure he is seen in a good light. God does not act for such self-referenced reasons, lacking in confidence. He knows himself, and only seeks to do right for its own sake, knowing that he will automatically be vindicated once his actions are understood.

So in dealing with Jonah, God is not an insecure Deity trying to enforce his authority, or worrying that he looks good before his universe. His primary concern is for others, Jonah included, and he wants them to see their true situation and desire to change. For the alternative is indeed judgment, the annihilation of self-destruction. God is not playing games, he is most concerned about everyone—and every living thing, even the cattle.

In the same way, God is saying, Jonah needs to share the same concern. Not to be self-referenced—as Jonah was, seeing his own needs as more important than the whole city of Nineveh, but wanting everyone to know and trust God. It is easy to forget the main purpose of God, the savior. Instead of being concerned about other issues, especially trying to meet our own self-centered needs, our concern must always be to help others on the way to the kingdom.

## Ellen White Comments

*God's Patience With Sinners.* The message was given Jonah to Nineveh, that in forty days it should be destroyed. Nineveh repented, and God spared the wicked city, because kings and nobles humbled themselves greatly before God, and the Lord gave Nineveh chance for repentance. If the Lord in His great mercy treats your case in a similar manner, oh, I shall be so thankful. If He grants you probation in which to manifest that repentance that needeth not to be repented of, because you see and sense the real nature of sin, that you abhor yourself because of your sin, and have an abhorrence likewise of the sin, the Lord is gracious, of pitying tenderness and loving kindness. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" [1 John 1:9]. {TSB 164}

Now when he sees the Lord exercise His compassionate attributes, and spare the city that had corrupted its ways before Him, Jonah does not cooperate with God in His merciful design. He has not the people's interests in view. It does not grieve him that so large a number must perish, who have not been educated to do right. {SW 79}

A merciful God accepted their repentance and lengthened the days of their probation. He turned away his fierce anger and awaited the fruits of Nineveh's humiliation. But Jonah dreaded being called a false prophet. He murmured at the compassion of God in sparing the people whom he had warned of destruction by the mouth of his prophet. He could not bear the thought of standing before the people as a deceiver. He overlooked the great mercy of God toward the repentant city, in the personal humiliation of seeing his prophecy unfulfilled. {LS80 203}

## Extra Material

The nursery rhyme "Goosey, goosey gander" ends with the words: "There I met an old man/ Who wouldn't say his prayers/ So I took him by the left leg/ And threw him down the stairs." Is that the way God behaves? Is he in the business of such "gentle" persuasion? Does he compel us? So many people seem to think so, that in order to stress the power of God he has to be seen to be using it—in forcing his own way.

The images of hell used by some are extreme examples of the God who forces—either do as I tell you or face an eternity of excruciating torture. Some choice! What kind of response *should* a mind based on reason give to such coercion?

Is God as intolerant as us? Does he torture us in order to save our souls, as did the Inquisitors in the Middle Ages? Or is he working to win, not through force, but by his patient lovingkindness as so clearly exemplified in the life and actions of Jesus?

Note the following quotes and recognize the options God chooses in how he deals with each of us, free beings in a free universe created by a freedom-loving God:

- God never forces us to do right, but He seeks to save us from the evil and lead us to the good. *Ministry of Healing*, 114.
- God never compels the obedience of man. He leaves all free to choose whom they will serve. *Prophets and Kings*, 511.
- God does not force the will of His creatures. He cannot accept an homage that is not willingly and intelligently given. A mere forced submission would prevent all real development of mind and character; it would make man a mere automaton. *Steps to Christ*, 43
- While force may secure outward submission, the result...is a more determined rebellion of heart. *Education*, 288.
- Force is the last resort of every false religion. *SDA Bible Commentary*, Vol.7, 976.

## 12. The Sign of the Prophet Jonah

**Texts:** Matthew 12:39-41; Luke 11:29-32.

### Quotes

- Those that profess repentance must practice it. Matthew Henry
- Repentance is the only gate through which the gospel is received. Basilea Schlink
- Repentance is but want of power to sin. John Dryden
- Confession without repentance is just bragging. Eugene Bolton

### Introductory questions

What did Jesus really mean by referring to this “sign”? What is the sign anyway? Why was the story of Jonah popular among Jesus’ contemporaries? Was it a ringing endorsement of their faith and their prophet? In contrasting his society with that of Nineveh, what message was Jesus trying to convey? What is wrong in asking for signs? What is true repentance?

### Discussion ideas

The “sign” of the prophet Jonah is not referring to any sign or miracle that Jonah performed. Jesus clearly says the sign *was* Jonah! In the same way, Jesus continues, the Son of Man *is* the sign to his generation. Jesus rejects the “sign-performing” mentality as perverse curiosity and fascination with the spectacular. He refused to pander to Herod’s demand for a miraculous sign during his trial, because it would have served no useful purpose as far as Jesus was concerned. He recognized that he could provide coercive evidence that would compel people to believe, but this is not what God wants. In fact God prefers to operate from a -miraculous position, since he does not want belief for the wrong reasons. Jesus rejected the fascination of signs, saying that unless the people saw signs they would not believe (John 4:48). He also warned about false Christs and false prophets who would base their appeal on great signs—a massive deception. (Matt. 24:24). Even the signs that Jesus did perform did not convince everyone (John 12:37).

The “sign” that they should respond to, says Jesus, is his very presence. What more could they want than that God was with them in the flesh. In the same way, Jesus surely responded with regret to Philip who asked for Jesus to show them the Father: “Jesus answered: ‘Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father?”’” John 14: 9 NIV.

The only worthwhile sign, according to Jesus, is recognizing and responding to the message of God, in its trustworthy trueness. Jesus refused to be seen as a miracle-worker who convinced people on that basis. Rather, like Jonah, he sought to speak and live the truth so others would respond. Also, his focus is not on the man Jonah—with all his many faults and failings—but on the response of the people of Nineveh. Jesus’ primary desire is to save, and that can only come about through repentance—a change of mind, as the Greek word clearly indicates. For without a different way of thinking, a changed attitude, a “new heart,” then God cannot act as the healing Physician and remake us into the divine image once more. Jesus contrasts the reaction of the Ninevites and his contemporaries, who thought that as the chosen people they had an automatic right to salvation and saw no need of repentance.

## Ellen White Comments

In His teaching Christ referred to Jonah. The prophet went to Nineveh to deliver God's message, and the warning rang through the streets of the godless city. His message humbled the nation at that time the mightiest in the earth. The proclamation of their destruction caused them to repent in great humiliation, and their doom was averted. The law of God was revered and the God of Israel honored and exalted throughout the heathen world. This experience the Jews kept ever in remembrance. But said Christ, "A greater than Jonas is here." {ST, January 27, 1898}

Jonah was one of these men, held in high estimation by the Jewish nation . . . . As Christ recalled to the minds of His hearers, Jonah's message and his instrumentality in saving that people, He said: "The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here." {LHU 37}

Christ during His earthly ministry referred to the good wrought by the preaching of Jonah in Nineveh, and compared the inhabitants of that heathen center with the professed people of God in His day. "The men of Nineveh," He declared, "shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here." Matthew 12:40, 41. Into the busy world, filled with the din of commerce and the altercation of trade, where men were trying to get all they could for self, Christ had come; and above the confusion His voice, like the trump of God, was heard: "What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" Mark 8:36, 37.

As the preaching of Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so Christ's preaching was a sign to His generation. But what a contrast in the reception of the word! Yet in the face of indifference and scorn the Saviour labored on and on, until He had accomplished His mission.

The lesson is for God's messengers today, when the cities of the nations are as verily in need of a knowledge of the attributes and purposes of the true God as were the Ninevites of old. Christ's ambassadors are to point men to the nobler world, which has largely been lost sight of. According to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, the only city that will endure is the city whose builder and maker is God. With the eye of faith man may behold the threshold of heaven, flushed with God's living glory. Through His ministering servants the Lord Jesus is calling upon men to strive with sanctified ambition to secure the immortal inheritance. He urges them to lay up treasure beside the throne of God. {PK 273-4}

## Extra material

Jesus is himself the sign. What more is needed in terms of supernatural proof than Immanuel, God with us? This is the key, for it reveals once again Jesus' prime motive for coming to this world—to seek and to save that which was lost through the revelation of the character of God. That God had been so often misunderstood and misrepresented, even by his special people, made Jesus' coming essential, for without the revelation of God in Christ, we would have continued in all our false assumptions and assumed premises.

God himself comes as the "sign," the proof of who he truly is. All the doubts as to God's true nature are swept away as we marvel at the gracious character of Jesus, his relentless endorsement of truth, and his trustworthy promises of healing salvation.

"He whose eyes have been opened to see the love of Christ, will behold the character of God as full of love and compassion. God will not appear as a tyrannical, relentless being, but as a father longing to embrace his repenting son." *Review and Herald*, February 3, 1891.

### 13. A Picture of God

**Texts:** John 12:44; John 14:6-10; 2 Corinthians 4:4-7.

#### **Quotes:**

- What a people bows before tell us what it is. Allan Bloom
- You are never dedicated to something you have complete confidence in. No one is fanatically shouting that the sun is going to rise tomorrow. When people are fanatically devoted to political or religious faiths or any other kinds of dogmas or goals, it's always because these dogmas or goals are in doubt. R.M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*
- Just in terms of allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There's a lot more I could be doing on a Sunday morning. William H. Gates III
- The single biggest cause of the problems of the twentieth century is that we have forgotten God. Alexander Solzhenitsyn.
- You're everywhere. You're omnivorous. Homer Simpson's thoughts on God.

#### **Introductory questions**

Why is one's picture of God important? How do we decide which picture is true? Don't we tend to make God in our image? How can we tell when we are following the Devil's picture of God? What was Jonah's picture of God, and how did this reflect reality? Can someone be saved with a wrong understanding? If so, why does it matter? How did Jonah change his picture?

#### **Discussion ideas**

The lesson quarterly focuses on some of the qualities of God it identifies in the book of Jonah: forgiveness, omnipotence, morality, personal nature etc. What other attributes of God are revealed in Jonah? Thursday's lesson (p.158, Teachers) is entitled "Jesus is a picture of God." Would it not be more correct to say "Jesus is *the* picture of God"?

The book of Jonah is rightly recognized as providing a great deal of insight into the nature and character of God. The real question is "why is this important?" Some argue that it doesn't really matter what concept of God you have as long as you obey the rules and do as you are told. What is wrong with that concept? Is salvation a matter of correctly understanding God? Or is just the application of the provided solution that will save us?

Jesus made it clear that he wanted to reveal God as he truly is. Yet even this belief can become something that is seen as just a dogmatic point. We may even have the right picture of God, and yet do nothing about it, or not wish to have a relationship with such a God. It is not just a question of getting the picture right, it is also vital to love such a God as he is revealed!

It seems that Jonah was included in Scripture primarily to reveal God's true nature—in contrast to the mistaken ideas of just about everyone else. Even God's spokesman Jonah had some severe deficiencies in his God picture, while we can only speculate on the errors believed by the sailors and the Ninevites. So how do we apply Jonah's experience to ourselves?

Most of all, how do we help others not only see God more clearly, but want to have a relationship with such a God? Is it only a question of describing God right, or is there much more to it? Think of those (like Homer Simpson above!) whose knowledge and experience of God is so limited and so damaged. How do we best share the truth in such a winsome way so that others will choose God and want to accept his gift of a relationship that saves and heals?

## Ellen White Comments

As the preaching of Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so Christ's preaching was a sign to His generation. But what a contrast in the reception of the word! Yet in the face of indifference and scorn the Saviour labored on and on, until He had accomplished His mission.

The lesson is for God's messengers today, when the cities of the nations are as verily in need of a knowledge of the attributes and purposes of the true God as were the Ninevites of old. Christ's ambassadors are to point men to the nobler world, which has largely been lost sight of. According to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, the only city that will endure is the city whose builder and maker is God. With the eye of faith man may behold the threshold of heaven, flushed with God's living glory. Through His ministering servants the Lord Jesus is calling upon men to strive with sanctified ambition to secure the immortal inheritance. He urges them to lay up treasure beside the throne of God. {PK 274}

## Extra material

Think of all the times the Devil has spread false ideas about God. Right from the beginning, Satan has been lying to humankind about the kind of person God is. First to Eve, then through Eve to Adam (Genesis 3). Then to Cain, in convincing him to rebel against the "arbitrary" worship requirements of God, leading him eventually to murder his righteous brother (Genesis 4). Then to all the inhabitants of the earth before the Flood. The time in which "the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and every imagination of the thoughts of his heart only evil continually." (Genesis 6:5).

Satan personally conducted the warfare, his personal vendetta, against Jesus when he came to this earth. He took every opportunity to continue his "smear job" on God. The more Jesus revealed God, the more the Devil worked to corrupt this truth, and blind the minds of his unbelieving slaves. (2 Cor. 4:4). Slaves? Yes—for while God wants trustworthy friends, the Devil imposes bondage upon those he forces to submit to his demands. "God seeks comrades and claims love, The Devil seeks slaves and claims obedience." (Rabindranath Tagore). An obedience that is based on slavish fear, an unquestioning terror that is always the Devil's trademark.

How successful has the Devil been in his campaign of celestial rumors? The evidence is all around. Atheism and agnosticism of all kinds; God getting the blame for everything and praise for nothing; a Devil-inspired ignorance of God that denies God not only of his real nature, but also his personality, even his very existence. God is only a mockery of God: a George Burns figure croaking out his jokes; a Santa Claus image no longer believed in by adults; a pathetic persona left on the sidelines of history.

An enormous tribute to the lying rumors Satan has spread about God. So successful are his misrepresentations that a belief in God is equated with irrationality. Faith is seen in opposition to common sense—something done *despite* what you know to be true. To Voltaire, observing religious faith in his time, "Faith consists in believing not what seems true, but what seems false to our understanding." Trust in the God of the Bible is not supposed to make any sense at all—so the Devil suggests. Such reasoning leads either to belief that makes no sense or no belief whatever—both of which achieves the Devil's aims.